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**Resisting Educational Inequality: Reframing Policy and Practice in Schools Serving Vulnerable Communities**

Focus Area 2

Resources of Hope: How schools and teachers can improve educational engagement

Chapter Title

**'Poverty and school processes: from equality of opportunity to relational justice'**

*Karen Laing, Laura Mazzoli Smith and Liz Todd*

*Introduction*

The emphasis in educational policy on equality of opportunity as a way to close the attainment gap between rich and poor is questioned in this chapter. In this chapter we analyse, through our evaluation of Children North East's audit process that aims to 'poverty proof the school day', the operation of poverty on the relational structures and associated actions within school. Our conclusion is the need to re-balance policy with a focus on relational justice.

Education policy in England tends to tackle inequality by using policy centred around equality of opportunity, based on ideas of distributive justice (Laing, Mazzoli Smith and Todd 2016). This is operationalised by the support for initiatives and interventions designed to improve outcomes for vulnerable pupils and a preoccupation with performativity and 'closing the attainment gap' between pupils living in poverty and their more advantaged peers. There is an emphasis on enabling children to receive the educational resources needed to succeed. 'Standards' in schools are driven by Ofsted whose judgements on whether schools are succeeding or failing are largely based on test and examination results, seeing schools as wholly responsible for their results. The increased governance freedoms of academisation<sup>i</sup> and free schools<sup>ii</sup> were also introduced in order to drive up standards. The government also focuses on parent choice of good quality schools, and the policy to increase selection of pupils for grammar schools<sup>iii</sup> is stated to be in response to the recognition that many parents cannot buy houses near the good schools (May 2016). Evidence is lacking for academy attainments (Gorard 2014), and the efficacy of grammar school policy (Andrews, Hutchinson and Johnes 2016). Moreover the gap between rich and poor has not appreciably closed and young people are still leaving school with inadequate qualifications (Clifton, Round and Raikes 2016, Gorard 2016). Overall, the wholesale emphasis on equal opportunities, while common and pervasive, has nevertheless struggled to reduce inequalities.

An underlying assumption of current policy is that schools, as the vehicle for equality of opportunity, are essentially beneficial and functional in reproducing what all members of society need. There has been a failure to consider the interaction of school systems and processes with poverty, which might suggest ways that schools contribute to barriers to learning for poorer students. A North East charity, Children North East, has pioneered a way to reduce the impact of poverty on the school day by working with schools to develop an audit process that looks at what is happening in individual schools and produces a tailor-made action plan. We were involved in evaluating the audit process and its impact on schools (Mazzoli Smith and Todd 2016). In this chapter we discuss our analysis of the ways that practices in schools can be unhelpful for children who are living in poverty. We consider the actions

that schools took to address such practices and suggest this calls for a different kind of justice in schools, relational justice, and appropriately refocused policy.

#### *Children North East and Poverty Proofing the School Day*

Poverty structures and restricts everyday childhood experiences leading to anxiety, unhappiness and insecurity (Ridge 2011) and the following project and the accompanying evaluation demonstrate the ways in which institutional school practices can compound this. *Poverty Proofing the School Day* is a comprehensive audit tool developed by a charitable organisation based in the North East of England (Children North East). The tool was developed in response to young people living in poverty articulating a desire to end the discrimination they faced at school. The teachers and young people from four schools were involved in developing the tool. They acted as co-researchers with professionals from Children North East in order to research the the impact of poverty in schools and ask how children know who is poor in schools. The development process engaged with young people and teachers in four schools as co-researchers. Schools can sign up to the poverty proofing audit process in order to remove barriers to learning for disadvantaged children. The audit process consists of:

- an online questionnaire and face to face interview with parents, staff and governors;
- face to face interviews with all young people in the school in small groups;
- a written report and action plan;
- training sessions for staff and governors; and
- ongoing implementation support.

The audit process is distinctive in being comprehensive in terms of surveying and meeting with all the stakeholders in a school from governors to pupils. It also aims to be respectful, educative and dialogic. Consultation with each group (from pupils to governors) includes some information about poverty, is presented in a manner that respectfully recognises that some of the consultees will themselves have experienced or be living in poverty, and invites discussion.

The whole school consultation process has, in the schools that have participated to date, led to on average over thirty action points being raised in each school. It has provided schools with a unique, externally facilitated viewpoint on how pupils living in poverty have experienced stigma. Whilst some issues were pertinent to particular schools, most were generic across all the schools. The areas raised in the action plans covered elements of much of school life, including: uniform, examinations, extra-curricular activities, school support for parents and families, staff relationships with/ support for pupils, food, homework, resources, transport, school leadership/governors, setting, bullying. Our findings of the impact of poverty on the school day is supported by other studies (Bragg et al. 2015, Holloway et al. 2014b, Horgan 2007, Ridge 2011) but there is little recognition of the changes that all schools can make. Many are school processes and practices which appear to be minor and which could therefore be easy to change, but the negative impact on pupils was shown to be great. Most of the changes advised in the action plan can be carried out with no, or little, financial implications for the school. However, other issues were ones that took time to think about, involving people in problem solving a solution, and some had a financial cost to the school. Schools regularly commented that the issues raised were not ones of which they were aware. A few examples of the areas that were dealt with by the school as a response to the poverty proofing audit process are in the boxes below and have been reproduced from our evaluation report (Mazzoli Smith and Todd 2016).

#### ***Extra-curricular activities***

***Concern was felt in one school about the fact that parents were often worried about a letter potentially coming home any day asking for money for a trip. This was exacerbated with siblings in***

*school and challenging as these costs could not be planned for. As a result this school has instigated an audit of all the trips for which money is being requested, as they realised there was no central information held. They are responding by reconsidering the value of all their trips and looking into a way of notifying parents at the start of a school year about what trips are due to take place, giving them a longer timeframe in which to pay.*

*It was highlighted to another school that they had been charging pupils for a fieldtrip which is a compulsory part of coursework and this is illegal.*

*Pupils in another school had also talked about how lists of those still owing money for trips was routinely read out in class, stating that the trips could not happen without payment, yet this does not accord with the voluntary nature of the contribution. This school will no longer publically discuss payment for trips and is looking at more proactive ways of supporting parents who find these payments difficult and also of subsidising trips.*

#### **UNIFORM**

*Most schools in England require children to wear a school uniform and specify what clothes are required, sometimes including the shop that parents are expected to use.*

*One of the schools using young people as peer researchers heard from pupils at a neighbouring school that the cost of their school uniform was too high. As a result cost were reduced. The school has also become more proactive about discreetly giving pupils uniform when they clearly do not possess it, rather than resorting to punishment. They even take their pupils to the local shoe shop to replace their shoes and have an account at the school uniform supplier to buy items for pupils whenever these are needed.*

*One of the schools noticed for the first time, as a result of Poverty Proofing, that some of their pupils had never attended school on charity dress-up days, so the number of these has been cut and other ways to raise money for charity found. This school has also started a second-hand uniform shop at school. However attempts to change uniform policy are not easy. In one of the participating schools for instance, the action plan highlighted the fact that pupils were routinely spending £100 on trainers and those who could not afford this felt stigmatized. The Head teacher therefore decided to buy standard school trainers for all pupils, but this was very unpopular, even with the pupils and their families who could least afford expensive trainers. The school has now moved to a policy that all pupils must wear black shoes, avoiding trainers altogether.*

The evaluation of *Poverty Proofing the School Day* found evidence of changed attitudes and a shift in the ethos of most of the participating schools. The schools reported that as a result of the audit and the support and training in implementing the action plan, they were starting to see everything through the 'poverty proofing lens'. There were many examples from across the participating schools of low-cost or no-cost ways in which foregrounding relational justice could reveal alternative practices, for instance no longer publically listing pupils on free school meals and reducing the numbers of non-uniform days. These changes led directly in some schools to an increase in the uptake of free schools meals and a decrease in non-attendance, as it was found that some pupils had never come to school on a non-uniform day. School audits of trips across the year and of access to technology for homework which had to be done on a PC led to staggered payment plans for parents or a reduction in trips at certain points in the year, with the result that more pupils in the most disadvantaged circumstances could attend, and more in-school access to IT provision.

*What kind of injustice?*

Our analysis of the poverty proofing audit of schools carried out by Children North East is useful in helping us to understand what is missing from a policy focused on equality of opportunity. Firstly, this audit suggests schools need to engage in a process of reflection and change: it is about schools and what they need to do.

Secondly, our evaluation suggests that schools are unlikely to be able to tackle inequality only by providing better quality or targeted additional resources. Access to such resources are important and there is evidence of impact on children's outcomes (in relation to extra-curricular activities: Chanfreau et al. 2016; and in relation to pupil premium funded school activities, Macleod et al. 2015). What our analysis of school action plans in the poverty proofing process shows is that it is not only the provision of resources that matters but the manner in which they are provided. Furthermore, where there is a lack of access to opportunities, resources and provisions we suggest that this does not only impinge on access to learning experiences but also impacts on relationships. A significant area of focus within the audit tool was on relational practices, which were inadvertently shaming or stigmatizing some pupils. For example, teachers often asked primary aged pupils at the start of a school term where they had been on holiday. Sometimes they did not believe pupils who replied that they had not left their local area over the holidays or they would offer pupils details of their own holidays to write about if they had indeed not been away. Schools were unwittingly stigmatising pupils in how resources, such as free school meals, were administered. There were multiple occurrences of stigmatization impacting on well-being, identity and learning/engagement even in schools which had a strong and explicit commitment to supporting their most disadvantaged pupils.

Poverty interacts with school systems to create conflict between children and teachers, between children, and between parents and teachers. In one school homework support for children who did not have the internet at home could be available during break times but this was regarded as punishment by the children. In another school a parent commented: ***"I don't have the internet. Stop telling me to do things on it to help my child"* (Parent)**. Pupils reported that bullying about what you can afford was intensified on non-uniform days, on the days when children were permitted to wear their choice of clothes. Children reported that teasing and name calling took place as a result of poverty and that staff were not aware of such teasing taking place. Research on the impact on families of the bedroom tax found similar relational effects (Bragg et al. 2015).

We know from existing research that children feel 'shame'. Several studies have demonstrated the worry and embarrassment children feel, even very young children, about not having money for school (Bragg et al. 2015, Holloway et al. 2014a, Horgan 2007). Shame is not just a personal internal experience but is relational. It happens due to one's interaction with both personal and social norms, and influences one's behaviour in relation to others. Relationships with children's own families is influenced. For example, children reported being asked by staff 'who has dinner money'? School debt was the biggest indicator of who is struggling financially throughout the school years. In one school a child said: ***"You get an envelope with staples on, I folded mine up and drew a picture on it and gave it to my mam because she hates dinner letters."***

***"It looks different to all the others. My mummy just rips them up and puts them in the bin. It makes my mummy upset. When I bring a letter home my mummy says put it in the bin now."***

The relational nature of the impact of poverty on children at school is emphasised also by what happens when schools try to make changes so that the identified impacts of poverty are reduced or stopped altogether. Many of the changes are about systems within schools but systems change usually requires interaction to engage in problem solving, more conversations between people to find the

solutions. Some teachers found that pupils would not accept free uniform if it was offered to them directly, but would take it if it was left discreetly in a cupboard they knew about and from which they could take it anonymously. Other examples centred around financial contributions: the notionally voluntary contributions that pupils were being asked for in order to go on school trips, or charitable giving on non-uniform days. Such contributions were often asked for publically, putting a pressure on families and children to pay, rather than be seen to not be able to afford it, and thus putting family finances under increased and unnecessary stress. The audit revealed that there were more discreet alternatives, and that teachers taking time to get to know families and their circumstances would lead to a better understanding of their needs and how to avoid stigmatising them further. This was a focus on relational justice and it enabled solutions to be found. It was also about a focus on poverty and its impacts as inter-relational, stopping to take account of relational consequences such as shame, rather than a focus on poverty as individual.

### *Exploring processes of relational justice*

Relational justice is concerned with the kinds of equity or equality that arise through our relationships with others, incorporating notions of dialogue, negotiation and shared understandings. As such, it highlights the centrality of the 'nature of the relationships which structure society' (Gewirtz 1998, 470-471) and considers

'issues of power and how we treat each other, both in terms of micro face to face interactions and in the sense of macro social and economic relations which are mediated by institutions such as the state and market' (Gewirtz 1998, 471).

Our evaluation found that cultural and institutional practices normalized certain behaviours which could lead to stigmatization. The bias towards a functionalist view of education, where problems are explained at the micro level of the individual (Raffo et al. 2007) is not therefore the starting point for this work, nor is it the outcome. Changes made as a result of considering relational justice are both empowering for pupils living in poverty and create the conditions for meaningful dialogue about cultural and institutional barriers to its enactment in practice. Relational justice is a central rationale for these changes and its absence part of the explanation for why such stigmatizing practices go unnoticed. In other words if we were to foreground relational justice more in schools we would notice more the impact of poverty and young people would be more likely to have this both accepted as an outcome and only then, dealt with.

It is important to examine why a relational conceptualisation of the impact of poverty on schooling does not seem to have been readily available either to policy makers or to school practitioners. Thompson et al (2016) note the absence of research about the fact that educational failure is too often perceived to be located in the individual child/home rather than within institutional practices/cultures. Our evaluation, in understanding stigmatization as in part resulting from a lack of relational justice, necessarily shifts the focus away from the individual child/home. Barriers to seeing instances of stigma were partly structural e.g. time, narrowly prescribed focus, but also extended to cultural barriers, such as the difficulty in discussing the challenges of poverty in the light of moral condemnation and denial (Shildrick and MacDonald 2013). Where teachers questioned how far it was their role to compensate for pupils living in poverty, drawing on relational justice could reframe the issue as one not about role, but rather as about pupil rights to respect and recognition. The demands of relational justice necessitated making implicit behaviours and views explicit in dialogue with others, in order to understand the impact on pupils. Furthermore the methodology of research has been important: stigmatising practices have largely been hidden without an understanding of pupils' lived experiences as provided in our evaluation. Children North East's poverty proofing audit process is one way that teacher awareness can be raised of the educational impact of poverty. Others include a dialogic approach to the topic within initial teacher education . There are several dialogic approaches

(including, for example, community of enquiry) that encourage open and honest dialogue in group settings, enabling exploration of different perspectives, and the potential to change the views of trainee teachers towards poverty (Jones 2016).

The importance of relational justice in considering the impact on education of poverty is not surprising to us. In a recent study (Mazzoli Smith, Todd and Laing 2017) involving focus groups with 80 young people aged 16-18 on their conceptualisations of fairness, the category of statements coded as 'examples of relational justice' was the largest single category. Students were inspired by issues such as respect and recognition, pupil wellbeing, and a vision of the kind of community we might wish to live in. The quality of their inter-personal relationships mattered, not just as a means to respect and recognition, but also, students argued, as being at the heart of their engagement and successful learning experiences.

Students were concerned about how discriminatory practices could impinge on the basic inviolable right to self-determination, that is to be respected as an autonomous and self-defining agent, including practices driven by equality of outcome aims such as labelling practices associated with the allocation of special provision (e.g. to access widening participation activities). Students tended to prioritise equity and relational justice over differential treatment according to need. Complex notions of relational justice are generally absent in national policy, and yet are very important to young people in their everyday experiences of education and, as shown in our evaluation of the poverty proofing audit, are central to attempts to remove the impact of poverty from schools.

A fundamental flaw in approaches centring on distributive justice is that they rely on functionalist and individualist principles, seeking to influence a change in the child, rather than a change in the systems and structures that a child lives and learns within and that impact daily upon life experience. This emphasis on distributive justice neglects to take into account other processes of disadvantage at work within schools, and within the education system more generally, and the processes of choice and freedom that more advantaged parents exercise (Ball 2010, Reay 2004, Reay 2012, Vincent and Maxwell 2015). There is a need for a wider debate in schooling about the importance of relational justice in schools, and development of appropriate policy. The Children North-East audit is a striking, and we would suggest troubling, example of how a lack of adequate attention towards the inter-relational aspects of schooling has been a critical factor in the ongoing and often hidden stigmatization in schools of children living in poverty in England today.

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<sup>i</sup> Academisation refers to the New Labour policy, announced in 2000 in England and continued by successive governments, whereby schools are taken out of local authority control to become academies; self-governing, non-profit charitable trusts. They do receive funding from the Department of Education but may also receive additional funds from corporate or personal sponsors, who have an input into the curriculum, pay and conditions of staff.

<sup>ii</sup> Free schools were launched in 2011. They are a type of Academy, publicly-funded but outside of local authority control set up by groups of parents, teachers, trusts, charities, religious and voluntary groups.

<sup>iii</sup> Grammar schools date back to the 1944 Education Act and some 163 secondary grammar schools still exist in England today, although no new grammars are permitted to open. They are selective by ability at age 11, pupils sitting the '11 plus' examinaion in their last year of primary school. The current Conservative government had attempted to reignite the debate about their re-introduction.